

WISDOM OF THE EAST

ABU'L ALA, THE SYRIAN

BY HENRY BAERLEIN

My sin is less than my fond hope
That thou wilt pardon me;
They are so great, this hope and sin,
But very small to thee.

ASHAK BEN IBRAHIM, THE SINGER



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¹ In "The Diwan [that is to say, the selected poems] of Abu'l Ala" there was an endeavour to arrange a number of his thoughts in something that to us would seem a more or less connected whole, a philosophic whole, whatever it might seem to Orientals. Such of his poems, therefore, as were taken for that purpose were not necessarily the most beautiful nor the most profound. It would be strange if all the poems of a man such as Abu'l Ala, who wrote for many years, were always to illustrate his philosophy; and it would have been far stranger if we could have joined them all to their companions. We have here joined some of them to various kindred poems from other pens.

NOTE.—Seeing that the vignette which Dr. Dillon once designed for his notepaper and copyrighted, by the way, was so appropriate, he has been good enough to let me place it on the cover of this book. It represents the wind blowing at a piece of thistledown, while underneath, in Arabic, we read that all things pass away.

TO C. W. NICHOLSON

I TAKE this opportunity, as rural correspondents say, of writing to you, and indeed it is but seldom that an opportunity presents itself, for we have never been, and shall not be, in that condition which obliges people to communicate with one another, out of one room to the other room, by written words. . . . It is so often said that this or that book never would have been produced without the sympathetic presence of a certain person. But, for my part, I would shrink from saddling you with such responsibility, and yet without you they would not have been just what they are—I should say, “were” in speaking of the others. In your presence I have not been hindered from soliloquy—a very soothing practice—and from more soliloquy. Yes, you have listened with the patience of a cloud of angels, even when the stuff was diabolic. And the fragments of a hundred books which I have thrown at you will have played havoc with your legal mind if you remember them, which

I do not. . . . Perhaps, though, you remember that the frontier-town of Luxemburg, through which we walked some years ago, is Uffingen in German, while in French it is (invidiously) Trois Vierges. Well, don't you think that, as we stand upon the frontier of this book, it would be wise to warn the reader that in Arabic the poems and the life of old Abu'l Ala are picturesque and vivid, while in English they are merely Uffingen ?

H. B.

EDITORIAL NOTE

THE object of the Editors of this series is a very definite one. They desire above all things that, in their humble way, these books shall be the ambassadors of good-will and understanding between East and West—the old world of Thought and the new of Action. In this endeavour, and in their own sphere, they are but followers of the highest example in the land. They are confident that a deeper knowledge of the great ideals and lofty philosophy of Oriental thought may help to a revival of that true spirit of Charity which neither despises nor fears the nations of another creed and colour.

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ABU'L ALA, THE SYRIAN

PART I

THE LIFE OF ABU'L ALA

ABU'L ALA was born at Ma'arrah in the year A.D. 973, the son, he says, of such a modest father that on the Day of Judgment he would make an effort to avoid the crush. His mother died when he himself was studying at Baghdad in his thirty-seventh year. And both these families, apparently, had unconventional opinions, for the pilgrimage was never taken by his father, his maternal uncles or his cousins. This neglect was not so serious as if they had refused to fast, seeing that you were obliged to make the pilgrimage; but if you failed to do so were not punished, while a person who declared he would not fast was by the law commanded to be kept away from other men and meat and drink.

Ma'arrah of Nu'man is a Syrian village, nineteen hours to the south of Aleppo; a colony of grey cabins on the side of a hill, a place of frozen water

and of windless heat ; there is somewhere among the dust of it the dust of one who wrote imperishable words. Even while he lived he was accounted as the greatest of the sons of Ma'arra, so that the name of his village was given to him as a surname ; he called himself the twofold prisoner, on account of his voluntary confinement and of his blindness.

For when he was three and a half years of age he fell a victim to smallpox, losing thus the sight of his left eye and impairing that of the right. "There are very skilful physicians," wrote the Chinese historian of the T'ang dynasty, "who will open the brain and take out worms, with which they heal blindness." But he was talking of the Byzantines, and in Arabian chronicles we read of more effective methods for the loss than the recovery of sight. Auhad of Zaman, for example, a celebrated doctor of the twelfth century, wishing to be cured of elephantiasis, allowed himself to be bitten by vipers which he had kept some time without food ; after receiving a great number of bites he was cured, but blind. Abu'l Ala's memory was so tenacious as to recompense him for the partial loss of sight. In fact, he might have used the words which were employed by Ibn Hasur, the learned and poetical vizier, when he was told about the burning of his library.¹

¹ This biography of one who was more than a Montaigne of digressions is, no doubt, very much too digressive and

Both as poet and philosopher he could console himself with precedents. Rudagi, blind from birth, was not prevented from becoming one of Persia's greatest poets. To applaud him, said another poet of the period, is an impertinence. He wrote of autumn's wind that it has scattered golden pieces in the bosom of the wood, as the rain of the King's hand in the breast of those who come to see him. The philosopher was Rhazes of Baghdad, who refused in his old age to be operated on for cataract. "I have seen the world," said he, "and so deep is my disgust that I have no regret in seeing it no more. . . ." Abu'l Ala took lessons from his father and pursued his studies at Aleppo, which was then a noted place of learning; afterwards he went to Antioch and Tripoli. The subjects which attracted him and which, as often happens with the blind and relatively blind, became a part of him, consisted of the pre-Islamic poets and the proverbs and the legends and the glories of the language of Arabia. With regard to later poets, Mutannabi the sublime was whom he most affected, while on the other hand his master in austerity was Abu'l Atahijah. If he had been willing to devote himself to panegyric he was on the threshold of an easy life. Of this he had exaggerated for the English reader. But in various places, as for example here, it would at all events be less abrupt if we had not thought it preferable to have all the verses gathered together in Part II.

perience when he directed verses to the governor of Aleppo and some others ; but he very soon abandoned this profession, which had fallen into disrepute. What it involved, for instance, was the praising of a man like Adhadewlet, as was done by the poet Mahomet ben Omar el Enbari. We have got the verses which he wrote when Ibn Bakijet, the vizier, was assassinated by command of Adhadewlet. After this unhappy person had been blinded and conducted with humiliations through the town of Baghdad, he was stamped to death by elephants and finally hung up outside the hospital.

Abu'l Ala preferred to live upon the income of a trust, although it brought him only thirty dinars yearly, and he was compelled to keep a servant, owing to his partial blindness. And, as he was struggling to support himself upon this meagre sum, one individual at any rate was wrongly in receipt of public money for the blind. A certain Abu Jaafar asked that he should be inscribed upon the list. "Even so," said the charity commissioner, "for God has spoken, saying, 'It is not the eyes which are blind, but the hearts contained in the bosoms of men.' " "And inscribe my boy," said the petitioner, "upon the list of orphans." "That also shall I do," was the reply, "for he that has a father such as you is verily an orphan." Abu'l Ala would be about twenty-two years of age when he returned to

Ma'arrah, staying there till he was thirty-five. That he was of some consequence is shown by his replying to the letter which had come from the court of the Egyptian caliph to the people of Ma'arrah. And he occupied himself with writing many of the poems afterwards collected and entitled *Sakt al Zand*, which means *The Falling Spark of Tinder*. It was not unusual for poets to provide a commentary on their work, and if it ever was desirable it was so for the *Sakt al Zand*, where Pegasus deploys the manner of a hippodrome. There was indeed a commentary—*The Light of the Spark which Falls*—but it has been lost. These early poems are not noticeable for philosophy, and if their author's income had not been disputed, so that he repaired to Baghdad, it is nearly certain that the greater poems would not have been written.

And with what relief he gazed upon the minarets of Baghdad! Now would all his troubles end, even as the jolting of the road was ended! But there was a man called Thalab, a grammarian, who met his death in Baghdad owing to the violence of the roads. A horse collided with him, and he fell into a pit of such a depth that he was lying when they took him out. Abu'l Ala was also very pleased because he had avoided highwaymen, who were a common scourge, although the Koran recommends that they be crucified, or banished, or have their hands and feet cut off.

The boat on which Abu'l Ala was sailing down the river had been confiscated ; but the robbers were not ordinary highwaymen—they were officials of the governor of Baghdad.

Looking for a moment at the town's material prosperity you comprehend the dazzling of Abu'l Ala. To come to such a place beyond the wilderness ! . . . Al Khatib, in his *History of Baghdad*, gives a good account of the reception of Byzantine Ambassadors, who travelled to the town some years before Abu'l Ala. First of all, they were detained a hundred miles from Baghdad at a place beside the Tigris ; here they stopped for two months, and another two were spent in Baghdad waiting for the audience. At last, when it was felt that the ambassadors were in a fit condition to be thoroughly impressed, the caliph settled to receive them. All the balconies were let for many dirhams, and the Byzantines proceeded to the palace. In the first apartment they conduct themselves as though they stand before the caliph, but it is the chamberlain ; and in the next apartment they repeat the ceremony, but it is the vizier's ; in the third apartment is the caliph. Possibly these errors of the Byzantines were not so serious, because in a Franconian village, when they had approached Charlemagne, the room in which they found him was the fourth, and in the other three they were expected to behave as if they thought it was the emperor's.

And yet in Baghdad one supposes that they were not too sophisticated to enjoy the sight of seven thousand eunuchs, of seven thousand chamberlains and four thousand black pages. Perhaps they really were astonished when the caliph's jewels took a part in the procession, all of them on trays. And if they were not entertained as much as was the Chinese Emperor in Andersen at listening to the artificial birds, they could feast their eyes upon a hundred real lions, or on elephants whose clothing was a peacock-silk brocade. And Baghdad, where such things could be enacted, must have seemed extraordinary to Abu'l Ala. He found a lodging in an old part of the town where he exchanged civilities with Abu'l Taiyib, the *cadi*. This official sent a copy of complimentary verses and the new-comer improvised replies. He soon began to make acquaintance in the world of letters, after having prayed an influential theologian to recover him the boat. A literary man would make his way by publicly reciting in the mosque or in the patron's private house. Abu'l Ala became a protégé of Sabur, whose academy was furnished with a hundred copies of the Koran and ten thousand volumes of other literature. Apparently the Sakt al Zand was helpful in securing for Abu'l Ala a good reception. Of his friends was Al Radi, a descendant of the Prophet's son-in-law and looked upon as the sublimest poet of the Prophet's

line. His father dying in the year 1010, Abu'l Ala composed a lamentation which announces that he will no longer write for payment.¹ And a little later he withdrew from Baghdad. There is some uncertainty about the reasons which impelled him. In a poem he declares that it was owing to his mother's illness and his own diminishing resources; but there was a literary quarrel with Al Radi's elder brother, which resulted in the poet being dragged out by the feet. This quarrel was concerning Mutanabbi, whom Al Radi's brother did not like and whom Abu'l Ala revered. In fact, he wrote a commentary on his poems, but this also has been lost. We have a touching letter which he sent to his maternal uncle from the place between Baghdad and Ma'arraḥ where he got the information of his mother's death. And now he thinks that he would sooner stay upon the wilderness. "I would give my nose," he writes, "if the earth were free of men as is tanned leather free of hair." And, apart from his domestic sorrow and the recollection of the joys of Baghdad,

¹ By the way, the Minnesingers differed from Abu'l Ala and from the troubadours in that they had no self-denying views upon the subject of emolument. A troubadour would not accept in wages anything but love. And this does not appear unnatural when we remember they were unaccustomed to perform in person. That was done by musical attendants, jongleurs, who, says Guiraut de Calanson, were expected to discourse upon at least nine instruments.

there was further cause for pessimism. The political conditions were most menacing. The gorgeousness of Baghdad was no longer a delight; he saw therein the fatal luxury which undermines. Moreover, he had now examined Islam, and, in common with most theologians, found that in it was no satisfying answer to the question as to whether life had any value. Persians, if they wish to tell us that a king is dead, say he has left the transient house for that which is eternal. They say this, by the bye, of every king, quite irrespective of the numbers whom he has compelled to take this road before him. And the world was coming to believe that everything was transient and therefore—such is logic!—valueless. Abu'l Ala, however, was not merely saddened by the politics and the religion of the period; his meditations had been most profound; they had been influenced by Buddha. And it must not be supposed that he, like many of the Arabs, took to wearing foreign garments simply for the reason that he thought them picturesque. He was not one to clothe himself in ready-made philosophy. These Oriental ways of thinking had a vogue in Baghdad; but, with many of the converts, what persuaded them was a passionate abhorrence of the former mistress, Islamism in fanatic mood, rather than a knowledge of the Oriental who was now, so they pretended, sitting at their hearth. Many of the Arabs were, in fact,

not more successful than Ibn Batuta, the uxorious traveller, who searched upon the western boundaries of India for women of a fabled fairness. Now the stream of criticism which Abu'l Ala let flow on Islam did not render him less critical on other subjects. No thinker of that age had more of independence. If he thought it well to take unto himself an Eastern view, be sure it was in every case a view that squared with his philosophy. Just so the Moslem, finding that their fatalism was a doctrine of the Indians, adopted Indian stories (such as some of *The Arabian Nights*) that illustrated this idea. Some of the tenets of Abu'l Ala which have an Indian aspect, such as his theories on abstinence, have possibly a different origin; but we may take it that his thoughts on transmigration were imported from the East. He urges that there are three steps in the Creation: pure spirits which are angels, men, and lastly animals, which do not comprehend. It is possible for man to rise, by the practice of virtue, to the loftier class, and, yielding to his passions, to descend into the lower. He asserts that we are in a chain of necessities, with endless composition and decomposition.

Remember that Abu'l Ala was one who saw the shadows that encircle us. Whatever he might say, there was but one thing he was sure of, namely, that no single thing is sure. Otherwise—I refer to his poem on page 83—he

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would have used a favourite expression of the Somersetshire farmer: "As sure as God made little apples. . . ." Abu'l Ala had also some familiarity with Zoroastrian belief, and when he says that in the heavenly world there may be feeling as in ours, that in the planets may be wisdom, he is showing that he was acquainted with the systems of philosophy which then were being taught in Baghdad. Just as the attention of the Byzantine was turned towards the tactics favoured by the Slav or by the Saracen, so did Abu'l Ala prepare to build his own philosophy; he was persuaded that his own position would be strengthened if he knew the weakness and the strength of other people's.

He returned to Ma'arrâh, where he wished for isolation. "But for the defect of being dead," quoth he, "I should have been delighted to accept the post of laureate"; and, thus replying to the governor of Aleppo, he indulges in the cruelty of this poetic salutation: "The greeting of a grateful and loving servant; a greeting which joins sunrise to sunset and continues the attack with the rise of Hesperus, when the garments of night are rent; a greeting which, passing by the dusty plain, renders it fragrant as Indian perfume." How Abu'l Ala was occupied, with public and with private business, we have seen already, before he went to Baghdad. With regard to his interior we have the valuable notes of Nasir,

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son of Chosrau, the Persian traveller who visited Ma'arrah. He informs us that the poet would deny himself to none, notwithstanding that he was unsightly with the marks of smallpox and with one eye sunk, the other eye, not absolutely blind, projecting underneath a sort of pallid curtain ; and he suffered from a malady you cannot mention, so he says himself, which hindered him from going to the mosque. We gather from the same authority that the administration of Ma'arrah was entrusted very largely to the poet's servants ; but a learned man would often have, as servants, his disciples. And of these the number was two hundred, so that one is not surprised to hear that in his native town Abu'l Ala was much more wealthy than in Baghdad. Yet he gave out that he possessed no more than his requirements, since—to use the words of the Duc de Bourgogne, grandson of Louis XIV—"a king is poor with all the poverty of his subjects." And Arabia provides us with a good example of a person who was rich and poor. Ibnol Chammar, Christian and excellent logician, had been born some years before Abu'l Ala. When he was summoned to a pious pauper he would go on foot, for expiation, so he said, of his frequenting tyrants ; if he was called into the Sultan's presence he was wont to ride with every splendour and surrounded by three hundred slaves.

Before we come again to the consideration of

the literary labours of Abu'l Ala, we should refer to several facets of his disposition. He was uncommonly reluctant to unlock the gates of birth. And yet Abu'l Ala was full of most uncommon charity to men, and more especially to women. One would not expect him to applaud the women-worshippers, or, on the other hand, the women-slayers. He would have been as much bewildered as Herodotus if he had known that Lycians took their mother's, not their father's, name, whereas he would have looked askance on some of the Chaldaean gods, and not so much because they were female as because they were gods. He was too wise a man to swallow badness, if the bait was rather good; and he was far too wise to follow reason. Guided by his instinct, there was much more chance he would be right, for reason has too much of pride, too little of humanity. The views he found prevailing were in opposition to the pre-Islamic usage of burying their girls alive, and yet he might well hesitate before condemning those who, harassed by perpetual war, took what was then the only method to protect the girls from capture. "By God," quoth Kais ibn Aasim, a chief of the camels'-hair people—that is to say, the people who reside in tents—"by God, I have had many little girls, and I have buried all of them." "So that God has taken," cried Mahomet, "every noble sentiment away from you." But the disciples of Mahomet have continued to conduct

themselves in such a way, for instance in Macedonia, that fathers imitating Kais ibn Aasim would be praised for sentiments of high nobility.

And if a woman is compelled to earn her bread by practising the earliest profession, surely, said Abu'l Ala, she will not be accounted sinful in the mind of God. Nay, rather it is you who are to blame for teaching her to read and write instead of how to spin. He was not much engaged on love. And here, as well, his frame of mind was fashioned by himself, not by the local custom. Reacting from the time of luxury and freedom—Abdalmalik had postponed a service in the mosque so that his mistress could go round the Kaaba seven times—there was now much more restraint ("the more thou damm'st it up, the more it burns"), and the beloved's name was rarely mentioned. Sometimes there was put in place of it, for greater modesty, the name of some fictitious man; but if the woman's name appeared her minstrel thought it proper, though untrue, to say she was a widow. We remark in countries where the women are subordinate a greater value given to the friendliness of man to man. Before we draw from that a scandalous conclusion, it were well to think of Damon and Phintias, of Epaminondas and Pelopidas. Other of these poems have a mystic import, while in some the most unbounded love is felt apparently by one old gentleman towards another—and

there is a single word for love and friendship. But a song of love directed to a woman has been usually avoided in Arabia. "I know not which is worse," exclaims Abu'l Ala, "the cadi of Rai, or a poet who makes love-songs." Where a girl is married very young she requires that very simple language be addressed to her; she is without philosophy, and has no fascination for a poet like Abu'l Ala. So simple were the marriageable girls that even in the seventeenth century they came unclad from out their villages to sell provisions to the Maronite pilgrims who were going to Jerusalem, and who were fortunately, so they tell us, men of consecrated lives.

From his attitude to women we shall get considerable knowledge of Abu'l Ala. Despite the criticism of opponents, he was not a man who merely railed. No doubt he was what people call a pessimist,¹ but there is a noble pessimism which can see some other things besides futility, although it sees the world is futile. It attempts to read the riddles of the sky and from the conflagration of the world will carry little fires to many a hearth. It is your pessimist who pities more profoundly.

Rising from his meditations with the thought that life is not to be preferred to death—a view

¹ He said :

O men who love the world,
Restrain your loathing for the dogs who love and lick the dust.

which has been that of deepest thinkers: "We can have no happiness," says Socrates, "so great as dreamless nights"—Abu'l Ala would not, like some who say they recognize that life is poor, be constantly complaining that it is not rich. "If you should marry some one virtuous, then we would envy you; but if she have intelligence as well, then you are blessed. . . ." In his clothing and his food he was abstemious. Because he thought it wrong to use the skins of animals he walked in wooden shoes; his garments were of undyed wool, his despicable nourishment—the adjective was given by himself, but we may quote a couplet from *The Art of Cookery*, a British poem of the eighteenth century—

The things we eat by various juice control
The narrowness or largeness of our soul—

his nourishment consisted of some vegetables, for he thought it was a sin to take away from animals their milk or honey. One imagines that a saying of Mosaffer el Karmisi, his contemporary, could have been applied to him in all respects: hunger, when it is allied to continence, becomes the corn-field of ideas, the well of wisdom, the life of the soul. It would be interesting to discuss if these austerities were drawn from India. We know that with regard to certain creatures he procured undoubtedly from India the tenderness which animated his behaviour. "It is more

pious if I give its freedom to a flea than if to some one who is poor I give a piece of silver ; no difference exists between the flea and any king : both of them with equal ardour cling to life." But from the *De Abstinencia*, by Porphyry,¹ disciple of Plotinus, who flourished in the third century, we see that India need not have influenced Abu'l Ala ; for abstinence from flesh was practised, so says Porphyry, by primitive and uncorrupted races, by congregations of ascetics, and by various priesthoods. Also, from a correspondence which was carried on between Abu'l Ala and Hibat Allah Ibn Musa of Cairo, and which is happily extant, it would appear that his ascetic practices were not derived from India, since he says that he began before he went to Baghdad, and he makes no reference to the Indian doctrine. "My income," says the poet, "is a little over twenty dinars annually, and when my servant takes from that as much as he requires no very splendid sum is left. So I restrict myself to beans and lentils, and such food as I would rather not mention." "If you have sufficient energy," says the dweller in the land of flesh-pots, "to reply, I beg you will excuse me from recherché rhymes and forced figures of speech, because what I desire is sense, not sound." Abu'l Ala ascribes his habits not only to indigence but to pity for the creatures who, as he

¹ Cf. Thomas Whittaker, *The Neo-Platonists*.

says, dislike being killed in order to be eaten. The correspondence does not satisfy the Cairene that reason is in favour of a vegetarian life ; but he exhibits for the poet every token of respect. " You are," says he, " one of the glories of the time and one whose praise is carried everywhere." Abu'l Ala bemoans his miserable state. " You need not," says the Cairene, " be more kind to animals than is their Creator." And it is written in Isaiah : " He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man." But in Genesis we find : " Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you ; even as the green herb have I given you all things."

Abu'l Ala's soul was also like a star and dwelt apart, for when he came home from studying at Baghdad, being then thirty-seven years of age, he said, " My soul did not consent to my returning till I had promised it seclusion as complete as that of Al Fanik in the constellation of the Bull." One might observe that he allowed himself to break the promise, that he kept in touch with friends, that he received a number of disciples, that he dedicated poems to the governors of Aleppo, and that once or twice he was the spokesman of his native village. But he was a prisoner. In the midst of his pursuits he was more lonely than are many lonely men, because he could see further than they, and everywhere he saw the void. Not only did the darkness hang before

his eye, but before his inward eye there was a darkness much more fearful than his fellow-creatures dreamed of. "The world," they say, "is the Moslem's prison, the tomb his stronghold, and Paradise his journey's end"; still, there have been Mohammedans to whom the world has been a prison almost as delightful as the Paradise for which they confidently hope. Abu'l Ala, however, did not even have the solace of Mahomet's or of anybody else's Paradise. He was addicted to that very *fatal mania de pensar* which the Spanish Inquisition could not countenance, save at the time of carnival excesses. Paradise for him was knowledge, ignorance was hell. And so one cannot be surprised that his opinion of the world in which he found himself should not have been more enthusiastic. The limitations of the Arabs, when it came to Greek philosophy, were no doubt considerable. The Grecian form of mind, as too their politics, were in such contrast with the Oriental that one would expect an Arab to misunderstand them. Not only did this occur, but those among the Arabs who took upon themselves to be interpreters of Greek philosophy were often much to seek in thoroughness, and often were so deadly thorough that they swallowed, root and branch, what they could not digest. But our Abu'l Ala was not of these; he was not soothed, after the manner of so many Arabs, and non-Arabs, with

that old Greek exhortation which implies that one can know oneself. He knew that ignorance begins at home, and spreads across the world like a gigantic octopus. What folly to suppose that any one has ever penetrated to the knowledge of himself! And as for our knowledge of what is beyond—oh yes, we are prepared to classify it, saying that here is one solid foundation, there is another; and then we turn to building castles. Frequently we do so with a good intention; very frequently our eyes have not beheld the wounds—the dark and gaping wounds—that are upon the castle walls. Of course we have them beautified with ivy—seeing that we could not suffer the bare walls of common sense—and ivy, covering the wound, is not beautiful alone, but useful. Now the Syrian poet could not build with such assurance; he perceived that we are in a mesh of quagmires, and that if we build extensively we may perhaps avoid to place a wall upon the quaking soil, but we can scarcely help enclosing some of it within the purlieus of the castle. Abu'l Ala refused to dwell in the structures, more or less magnificent, which he found existing, and he refused to make one of his own. So the good man naturally has a share of the contempt of those who are the showmen of the master-builders. “Believe,” they cry, “in the religion of Jesus, or else in that of Mahomet, or even in that of Moses. See how long they have lasted!

How successful they are! And if you won't believe in a single one you must accept what a philosopher teaches, say Zeno the Stoic or Epicurus. And if you find you can't subscribe to one of those, well! make a philosophy of your own and tell us how you explain things. And if you can't do that we shall despise you. . . ." It is much in this spirit that de Boer, a noted Dutch Orientalist, speaks of Abu'l Ala, who, living at a time when the free life of Arabia was dying of Islamism, became the foeman of mechanical piety, the champion of mildness, the critic of political conditions—which indeed, were not beyond criticism—and of the scientific assertions of those who were known as the learned; perchance even the duties of life did now and then appear to him a trifle unimportant. "Under more favourable conditions," says de Boer "—for he was blind and not surpassingly rich—this man might perhaps have rendered some service in the subordinate walks of criticism as a philologist or as an historical writer. But, in place of an enthusiastic acceptance of life's duties he is led to preach the joyless abandonment of them and to grumble generally at political conditions, the opinions of the orthodox multitude, and the scientific assertions of the learned, without being able himself to advance anything positive. . . ."

Abu'l Ala was a great poet. Therefore he was a philosopher; but he did not attempt to found

a complete system of philosophy. To him it seemed commendable that we should do good disinterestedly, and because it is virtuous and noble to do so, without any outlook for reward. As for the credulity, wherein he says himself that he was deficient, let it be remembered that an orthodox belief may soon become unorthodox, and one cannot always be on the safe side by rejecting the old as having served its turn and accepting the new as an improvement, for I found the other day that St. Bernard of Clairvaux said that the idea of the Immaculate Conception was absurd.

We have mentioned that in several ways the poet mitigated his seclusion. With various of his acquaintances he kept in touch. "Whoever slights the learned," so says Ibn Abi Duwad, "loses his religion; whoever slights the magistrates loses his property; whoever slights his friends loses his manliness." And much of the charm, not to say rhetoric, of Abu'l Ala's correspondence is inspired by his old friends at Baghdad and other places, whom the poet longs to see. Such was the *cadi* Abd al Wahhab al Maliki (who died in the year 1045). This man, a jurisconsult and a poet, was obliged to leave Baghdad, where he says that he was treated like a Koran in the house of an atheist. "And if each day," he says, "there had been secured to me two pieces of bread I would have liked to stay." Upon the

road to Egypt he passed through Ma'arrah, where he was received and hospitably entertained by Abu'l Ala, who speaks about it in a poem, saying that, on account of the arrival of Al Maliki, he praised the misfortunes which compel a man to leave his native place and to wander. "When you declaim a verse," remarked the host, "I seem to have the Wandering King before me." Here he makes allusion to Imru'u'l-Kais, the greatest of the Poets of the Ignorance, for he was known as the Wandering King. . . . It may be that Ma'arrah was the mother of more literary men than you would expect from a place of that size; but, as compared with Baghdad, it was naught. Even if his fellow-townsmen did not merit the vituperation¹ of Abu'l Ala, which he does not scruple to bestow, and even when he is writing in their name to a high official of the Egyptian caliph, still it was unlikely that Ma'arrah would provide Abu'l Ala with anybody capable of giving more than flattery. Quite apart from his poems, how many people can there have been throughout Arabia who could approach him in that more than dazzling erudition which he shows, for instance, in the twenty-

¹ Here is the character which Disraeli gives the Syrians, and he was not badly qualified to judge: "Vain, susceptible, endowed with brilliant though frothy imagination; a love of action so unrestrained that restlessness deprives it of energy; with so fine a taste as to be capricious; so ingenious as to appear ever inconsistent."

34 HIS YEARNING FOR BAGHDAD

seventh letter ? As at Cordova, where during the winter months Ahmed ben Said (who died in the year 1012) used to assemble forty men of learning in a room that was adorned with woollen carpets and a brazier, so that they might appreciate the readings of the Koran and the fare which he provided for them—meats that were cooked with oil and sweets with butter ; so by the canals of Baghdad were peculiar delights for which Abu'l Ala did yearn. Buried in his native place, he was as much cut off from happiness as is the modern Frenchman who is forced to live among the well-contented people of a village after having loitered through some blissful months beside the book-stalls of the Seine. Far, far away from Ma'arrah were the shady trees and the great river, and the booths of them who dealt in books. He could not hear them crying out their goods. He must have thought of Avicenna, who was angry when a dealer, shouting in the usual falsetto, burst upon his meditations.

"I will not hear you," said Avicenna.

"Sir, it is a work on metaphysics."

"That is a futile science," answered the philosopher.

"Buy it ! Buy it for three drachmas, my lord, and you will be doing a noble action. Its owner is in want of money."

So the great man bought the book and found it was that work of Ebu Nassr of Farab which is

called *The Reasons*. On the next day Avicenna, for the joy his new possession gave him, scattered alms among the poor and gave thanks to God. Alas! Abu'l Ala would not be thrilled again by the bewitching cries of the City of Peace. He would not meet again his friend the librarian; he would not see the students at Sabur's Academy, where, as he says, their evenings were enlivened by the sprightly songsters who were as melodious as the dove; no more would he jostle against Indians and Persians; no more would he starve at Baghdad. We know with how much ease one can forget the toil of travel. We are surrounded by a friendly veil which separates us from the land to which we go, as from the land where we have been. Also there is a universal tendency to praise that which is distant at the expense of what is near. In Syria itself we have the Druses, who believe that if their lives are meritoriously spent they will be born again in China, whereas the wicked will be born in Egypt.

When Abu'l Ala had reached the age of seventy-four there came to Ma'arrah for one day a young Persian poet. He did not see the great man face to face, although he tells us that his door was never shut. "It is better," says an Arab proverb, "to hear of Mu'aidi than to see him"; at all events, we cannot be dissatisfied with the young traveller—both on account of his acts of

commission—the gossip which he spent his time in gathering—and also for his acts of omission, seeing that he is content to let a writer speak in writing. Moreover, it would have been impossible to get in one single day more than a vague idea of a man like Abu'l Ala. The nightingale alone can understand the rose, and this world of ours is not so full of roses and of nightingales as one would think from reading that other Persian poet, Hafiz, who ceases not to celebrate these two, the flower and the bird, except when he asks for money with which to purchase nightingales and roses. Now we have it from the Persian traveller, whose name was Nasir, son of Chosrau, that students, more than two hundred, and from many lands, were at that moment learning poetry and letters from Abu'l Ala. He was in these arts so sublime that the people of account in Syria and Africa and Persia were unanimous in holding him to be unrivalled. And Abu'l Ala denied himself to none—that is, to none of those who were worthy.

There was at this time the custom for a learned man to be held in repute. At the neighbouring Aleppo, Seif ed Dewlet had been in the habit of dining with four-and-twenty doctors, unto each of whom a proper salary was paid—that is, a man skilled in four departments of knowledge was paid four times as much as he who did not pretend to more than one department. And at this

time the profession of literature occupied a place of unwarranted importance. Not to speak of philology and grammar, there was much attention paid to penmanship and to the formation of the individual letters. Of course the Chinese literary person has a good chance of becoming a general or an admiral, or both; but in Arabia the people, being Semites, were what we should think more practical and more successful. Apart, however, from the diverse branches of literature the schools did not give much encouragement to the acquisition of knowledge. Astronomy, mathematics, medicine and metaphysics, excluded from the usual course of instruction, could only be learnt from private masters; and this was the case until recently. From the first centuries of Islamism it was the Koran, always the Koran which the narrow-minded held up as an education, not only a book of texts but a text-book; and for the most part they succeeded in their efforts. From time to time, as under Haroun al Rashid, learning was not made dependent on the Koran. One of the caliphs went so far as to declare war against the Emperor of Constantinople in order to make him allow a celebrated mathematician to visit his capital and give lessons there. Of a most famous librarian in Baghdad, a pupil of Abu'l Ala, it is narrated that his love of learning was so insatiable that he gave orders for serious books to be read to

38 WHAT THE KORAN CONTAINS

him whenever he should be lying drunk. But generally it was the Koran which was made the ground of study, and in the Damascus of to-day, where are five schools in which the pupils get a yearly payment from the foundation, there is in truth only one subject which is taught, and that is theology—whether the interpretation of the Koran, or the traditions of the Prophet, or logic or grammar, which are studied on account of their relation to theology. And it must be admitted that the Koran is not so small a field : there exist no less than seven different and legitimate ways of reading it, because it was originally written without points to mark the vowels or distinguish certain consonants from each other, while the absence of punctuation has given rise to various readings of the same text. A pious Moslem is not one of those who think that human beings can be employed more profitably than in searching for the truth ; nay, he thinks that they can find it in the Koran, all of which is truth, and when two passages are contradictory they both are true. Everything depends on what the Koran says—for instance, in our own time the mullahs of Turkey have put their veto upon representative government, saying that the Koran disallows it, while the French in Algiers were obliged to get one of these men to proclaim that the Koran is in favour of the study of foreign languages. But in the life-time of Abu'l Ala it

was Arabic and Arabic alone that his countrymen would learn. Primarily this was done with a religious purpose, for the Koran was composed while yet the people spoke the purest Arabic. In later centuries, owing largely to the mingling of the races, it was only in the desert that this language was preserved. "All is ruined," says Abu'l Ala; "so let the right pronunciation go. . . . Myself I use the popular dialect in talking to the people, so that I may meet them part of the way, for in their eyes my literary language is a fault." We find that as soon as the second and third centuries of the Hejrah there was an eagerness to learn the language of the desert Arabs, either with a view to comprehending such expressions of the Koran as were now becoming obsolete or else with the simple purpose of philology. Thus al Azhari, having fallen into the hands of the wild Karmathians, spent his time among them in making linguistic researches; when the Bedawi captives were in the year 839 brought into Baghdad many philologists hurried thither to collect from them; and the famous Mutanabbi, wishing to have the unadulterated language, went for some time to live among the people of the desert. If we consider how the Koran was regarded, and that it was written in a disappearing language—which was moreover held to be the best which Arabs had ever spoken—then we cannot be surprised to see how much

40 ABU'L ALA, THE LITERARY MAN

importance was attached to the learning of that language. Let Abu'l Ala be a good or a bad Moslem, at all events he was an adept in the language of their sacred book. And so the stream of pupils came to Ma'arras.

From all sides came the pupils. One of them, at Tibrizi, wanted to verify a text from some one well versed in philology. He put his manuscripts into a bag, and, being destitute of money, walked from Tauris to Ma'arras, with the result that his books were saturated in sweat, and after two centuries, at the time of Ibn Khallikan, they could still be seen at Baghdad, in a house of religion. Abu'l Ala was much more than a literary man, but his extreme devotion to the art of letters can be seen not only where he bows to Mutanabbi's greatness and objects to Ibn Hani, saying that the harshness of his phraseology resembles wheat-grains in a mill, but over and over again Abu'l Ala, with the persistence of a lover, harps upon his lady's ordinary features and obliges her to play the leading rôle, if it be suitable or not. Thus, writing of an aged servant, he remarks, "She is without strength in her body, and unable to utter a noun or a verb." Talking of Abu'l Ala's disciples, there must have been a number who were orthodox and held the Koran to have more than literary virtues. It may be that these students, reflecting on their master's religion, thought of the words of Ash

Shahrastani, when he said, in his *Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects*, that while the Jews fall into seventy-one sects, the Christians into seventy-two, and the Moslem into seventy-three, the men who follow their own opinions are uncounted.

Now we have turned our eyes upon the friends and the disciples of the poet. We have seen in some way how he occupied the long years of his life at Ma'arrah. For the moment we are overlooking that which is incomparably more important; after quoting from the young Persian who recognized that the great thing about a writer, especially a great writer, is that which he has written, we are trying to discover something else about Abu'l Ala. Why not print an honest translation of what he wrote? . . . But that, I fear, would be impossible. Supposing—which is not the case—that we were going to render into English the complete volume of this author's work, and supposing—which is not the case—that we were going to give an accurate translation, we should still have the uncertainties of a doubtful text. An editor of Shelley has good reason sometimes to hesitate before affirming that the poet wrote this word or that, since, from the habit of composing under a waterfall, the words of his text, as Trelawny says, run together in a most admired disorder; it might have been taken for a sketch of a marsh, overgrown with bulrushes, and the blots for wild ducks. But

how much greater is our difficulty with the text of Abu'l Ala! He did not put down his own work; he dictated, and subsequently furnished it with commentaries, because he did not think it would be understood without them. The commentaries have been lost. Also his writings have been attended to by scribes and editors; the former introduced their changes because they thought too little, the latter very frequently because they thought too much. Some of the poems were, until his death, in manuscript that was confused and quite indifferently punctuated. Afterwards the scribes who copied them committed outrage on the punctuation: which can easily be done in Arabic, for the three vowels are not written but are indicated, either above or below the consonants, by what are known as the diacritical points. So, then, we are confronted by the difficulties of the text, by the loss of the commentaries, and by the fact that it is impossible to give an accurate rendering in English of what was written in Arabic nine centuries ago—that is, not only a translation of the words and the plays on words, but also of the poet's meaning. Thus, in our endeavour to make an honest translation of what a man thought, we should be like to those historians who tell themselves that they can chronicle impartially what other men have done. Let them confess that there is no such thing as an impartial history. The writer

who persists in running with his nose upon the facts, this writer is the least impartial of them all. Picture him zig-zagging over the field, breathless that no fact escape him—firstly, some of those he misses may be momentous; secondly, he judges as of moment only some of those he finds. On his collected facts he brings to bear his taste, his inclination. Accept the words of Gibbon, that history is little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind—included in that little more is the historian's well-known human weakness which makes the work a valuable one for human beings. Writers of histories! do not feign to be impartial. Do like Joinville, the graceful and kindly, of whom it is testified in a certain manuscript that he wrought even as the sculptor Phidias, what time the Greek was weaving dexterously—weaving himself into the folds of the dress of Minerva. It is doubtful whether Joinville wrote the life of St. Louis more than his own, being, to say the truth, inseparably woven into it. Historian! let us know what you are—perhaps graceful and kindly—so that we may know how you have looked upon the facts. . . . As for me, dealing with Abu'l Ala, I recognize that my translation must be more or less dishonest. "There is no doubt in this book," says Mahomet, opening the second chapter of the Koran. Alas, I cannot say as much. So, then, if I widen the ground by

44 POETS AMONG THE PRIMITIVE

giving, not alone some sort of rendering of the poet's written words, but an account of him, there will at all events be more opportunity for the reader to become his friend.

Hitherto we have concerned ourselves with his private life ; it now remains to see the share he took in public matters, firstly as a poet, secondly as a citizen. Suffice it here to say that poets in Arabia at this period held the key to many chambers. Some of their influence had been shorn by the Prophet, who was himself a worthy poet. But when he failed in his attempt to supersede their poetry with his own, it was not unnatural for him to hate them and to launch satires against them. But when these also failed, Mahomet cursed the poets. "And those who err," he cried, "they follow the steps of the poets. Seest thou not how they rove, as bereft of their senses, through every valley ?" He declared that poetry was of the devil, though his countrymen's opinion had been that a poet, especially one who could make mocking songs, was under the protection of the higher powers, the jinn. All primitive people have held that a poet is under a kind of protection, and we, who do not call ourselves primitive, have much the same idea. We may not go so far as the men of Finland, who thought that poetry was of the gods, and also that the very instruments were made by them, such as the five-stringed harp of

which the strings are from a mighty stallion's tail ; whereas the harp itself was put down to the inventive genius of their highest god, Wäin-ämöinen. Ourselves we have thrown overboard a cargo that was beautiful : the crimson robes of Satan are sinking through the water, and we do not feel the breath of God upon our sail ; we have steered away from old horizons. Light is on the face of the waters, and we find often that the light is chilly. Then we try to people this emptiness ; we say that God or the Antagonist is there at work ; and we say that to the poet they whisper his poetry. Some of us look at poems and give the credit to God ; others may look at the same poems and give the discredit to the Devil. Again, there be others who change : they swear that poetry is from above, they swear it rises from below. Of these was Mahomet. And, although in his violence he was not like most people, he certainly was like them in the special violence which he reserved for his old opinions. Nevertheless, in the time of Abu'l Ala, there was a career for poets ; and, in spite of Ibn Khaldun, who deprecates originality—for this, the greatest of Islam's philosophical historians, will not allow that poetry can be produced in Arabia except by one whose memory contains a large amount of the classical verse, so that the poet's thought will not incline to wander down untrodden roads, and he will use the similes which are permitted,

46 THE BONDS OF ARAB POETRY

saying of a gum, for instance, that it is a pomegranate flower, or of an eye that it is a narcissus ; and for no better reason than that others have said so. Yet was originality not an absolute bar to the poetic career. Probably his well-wishers would urge upon a young poet that he should suppress the tendency to be original, and, rising from the contemplation of a multitude of poets, we are bound to put on record that they have but seldom failed to follow this advice. One of them did more, displaying a repugnance to this particular quality, and he, al Farazdak, was highly honoured. When he appropriated four verses of another man, who expressed his annoyance, al Farazdak's answer was that he himself had far more right to have produced them. Such an incident appears to us to be outlandish, but we have ourselves some keen adherents of the critic who complained that Safi al Hilli did not use obsolete words. And this adoration of the stale has not evaporated yet from Oriental poetry ; because in the *cassidas* it was customary to begin with a lament on finding the deserted camping-ground, then to proceed in haste upon a camel, the father of Job—so the poets of modern Egypt, telling us of their journey to an Oriental Congress, open the *cassidas* in the same way. First, they weep at the beloved's camping-ground, afterwards they rush upon a camel through the danger-lurking desert, and arrive at

last in Stockholm or Vienna. Thus, one cannot be surprised if authoritative Arabs say that Mutanabbi and Abu'l Ala, the two greatest of their post-classical poets, did not, as a matter of fact, produce poetry; indeed, Abu'l Ala is not only one of the most original of Arabs, but, says von Kremer, one of the greatest and most original literary geniuses whom the world has borne. When he came back to Ma'arrah there was waiting for him a position, as it were, of unofficial panegyrist to the ruler of Aleppo. It was not only princes who supported this kind of poet, but the same was done to some extent by ministers and provincial magnates. In the eyes of Mahmoud, the warrior-king, it was a service if one said a pretty verse to him, especially a verse of personal praise. At the court of Mahmoud were four hundred poets, and over them was one who bore the title of King of Poets. His employment was more arduous and more useful than that of an English laureate, as he examined verses, determined which was worthy of being presented to the king, and made all the needful corrections. Similarly, at other courts there was the sentiment that poetry should be encouraged. As far as words go we have those of Abd al Malik, the energetic caliph, who required the tutor of his boys to teach them the Koran, to prevent them from associating with people of the lowest and the highest ranks, to feed them on meat, to

48 HOW POETRY WAS ENCOURAGED

explain the old poems, and to see that their mouths and teeth were pure. As far as action goes we may remember Abu'l Atahiya, who died at Baghdad in the year 826. As a man he was nefarious, outrageous, ugly, satirical and impious ; as a poet he was renowned, with a very bitter tongue. He made up his mind, for religious motives, to renounce poetry, and himself relates that, in consequence, the caliph al Mahdi threw him into prison. There he met an elderly man who besought him to continue writing poetry, which was the cause of the high honour in which he had been held. Soon afterwards the two were haled before the caliph and the good old man was ordered to reveal some person's hiding-place : " And were he between my clothes and my skin," was the reply, " then I would not discover him to you." The good man was executed, and the caliph turned to the poet, bidding him to choose whether he would make verses or be sent after his companion. And he replied, " I will make verses." Thus it will be seen that a ruler was prepared, at all costs, to stimulate poetry. Furthermore, this caliph had a slave, Otba, who found favour in the poet's heart, and al Mahdi was disposed to give her in return for a poem. At Aleppo likewise there was an open-handed prince and Abu'l Ala could have become a channel of his liberality. Seif ed Dewlet had been, as the Jetimet expresses it,

the Kibla of their hopes, the place of discharge for the caravans, the propitious season for philologists, and the race-course of poets. To be sure Abu'l Ala did dedicate some panegyrics to the prince as well as to the Fatimite generals who were sent against him. This latter poem was composed when Ma'arrah had become divided from Aleppo, and our poet was a faithful citizen. But very soon he ceased from that sort of writing, which he had denounced some years before. The prevalent opinion was that it involved too much lying to be respectable—and yet the distance between truth and untruth is a hand's-breadth, says the Prophet's son-in-law; it is the distance between the eyes and the ears. Also the profession of panegyrist was an insecure one, owing to the patron's marked insecurity of life and the coming of a prince whom the poet had not flattered. Thus Abu'l Ala was wise when he settled to be honest.

Probably when he returned to Ma'arrah it was with the thought that local politics would not lay hold of him. He did not look for justice anywhere,¹ but he did not, like some philosophers,

¹ Boileau warns you :

Fuyez de ces auteurs l'abondance stérile
Et ne vous chargez point d'un détail inutile.

But one could mention, as another striking case of people who do not even look for justice, that among the gentle Siamese a governor is not said to administer a province, but to eat it. This, if there have been no recent changes, is the technical term.

imagine that an adequate reply to those from whom he differed was to tell them that they were unphilosophic. If they longed for justice he would help them. Once he travelled to Aleppo, at the head of a deputation, to procure the freedom of seventy fellow-townsmen whom the Prime Minister, one Theodore the Christian, had incarcerated. Abu'l Ala was successful, but he tells us that it was the cooing of a dove against the roaring of a lion. It may be that this action seems to us more praiseworthy by contrast with the poet's general attitude towards the town. We cannot say with absolute assurance that Abu'l Ala did really hate Ma'arraḥ. His exercise in oburgation is produced when he remembers Baghdad—*dont le seul nom étonne*, says Madame de Noailles—and, like scores of later artists, he has fancied that the most effective contrast for the very good must be the very bad, for the very dark must be the very light. And we may think Abu'l Ala to have been an imperfect artist when he painted Ma'arraḥ as the residence of utter gloom, so that Baghdad should appear the brighter. Some strength, one thinks, was added to his judgment on Ma'arraḥ by occasional grave lapses into rhetoric. He thought of such a phrase as "there comes a time there when a goat is as precious as Capricorn," and, being an Arab of the eleventh century, he could not keep himself from using it. But, on the whole, we see

that he was out of sympathy with his native place, and from this fact we are prepared to praise him the more that he became its champion.

"I forbid you," so he says, "to serve the State or to fill the post of preacher in the mosque." Yet he promulgated this on account of special circumstances: what should have been one State was now split up into a number of small and almost independent ones. The caliph's power was fading, and in the very Baghdad where he lived one saw the worldly power no longer his, but in the hands of the illiterate House of Bujeh. This caliph used to call himself "The Shadow of God"; he was the shadow of the House of Bujeh. Perhaps if the Abbaside caliphs had been less impotent, then the poet would have been less eager to support them. He declares himself as loyal to the Moslem precept that one should obey the ruler so long as he possesses force. "It matters not," says Ibn Gama'a, a very practical statesman, "it matters not if the ruler is uncultured, unjust or tyrannical. But if another usurper rise against him and despoil him of dominion, then is the conqueror to be considered as the rightful sovereign." The Moslem counsels that a man should be obeyed so long as he possesses force, and Abu'l Ala in practice, too, was as orthodox as possible. "So long as he possesses force" the people were enjoined to give obedience, and from time to time they made

investigation as to whether he had force enough to grapple with assassins. There was an ancient Arabic belief that in the poet's mocking verse there lay the force to injure bodily; the people who were thus attacked would fall upon the ground and let the words pass over them. Abu'l Ala examined now and then if those who ruled were capable of standing up against his words; sometimes he merely called them the people's slaves, at other times he said that they were falcons.

Thus Abu'l Ala could criticise the reigning house and still be in the loyal ranks. But other reasons made him hostile: he was of the fine rebellious disposition; the Abbasides had failed, and failure is fascinating; lastly, the usurping Bujides were a sort of savage, with few merits for Abu'l Ala except an acquaintance with Persian poetry. Still, they had the qualities of their defects, and, interfering little in the things of Syria, Abu'l Ala could only feel for them a dull resentment, vague, unsatisfying. The government in Baghdad was a dark and distant cloud, the nearer flash of lightning was a lurid action of Aleppo's government. We know it was laid down by lawyers of the period that no confession could be wrung from any man by physical persuasion, but if the government is with a single person, and he is not far better than a multitude, then he is far worse. If all the taxes had been for an end as admirable as the tax called *Sadakah*

their payment could not have been criticised by the pious Moslem. From this fund the relatives of a collector were excluded; it was meant for those who came over to Islam, and for those whom one might reasonably hope to win; likewise grants were made to slaves wherewith to free themselves, and further sums were dedicated to the men who for the State and Islam had been overwhelmed by debt. Islam and the State were thought of as identical; the Koran was the book of law, sacred and profane. But it did not follow that the law was righteously administered to those who believed in the Koran. We have enough examples, to be sure, of early Mussulmans who declined the post of judge owing to the great responsibility they would incur and the strict account which they would give to God. Rather than fill so dangerous an office many of the jurisconsults suffered persecution. "There will come upon a judge at the Day of Resurrection," said Mahomet, "such fear and horror that he will wish, 'Oh, would to God I had not judged between two persons in a trial for the value of a single date!'" It is told by Ibn Khallikan that when arose the question of appointing a judge at Bassorah and the choice lay between two reluctant men, al Kasim, the shrewder of them, said: "I solemnly aver, by the only true God, that Iyas Ibn Moawia is an abler jurisconsult than I, and knows better the duties of a

cadi; and if what I say is false you cannot legally appoint me because I am a liar, and if my declaration be true it is incumbent upon you not to ignore it." There is much likelihood that Moslem judges will be wrong, because, except in certain cases, oaths are not required, and in criminal cases are not receivable. Nevertheless, as time went on it was easy to find people who would take the risk of being judges, and not even good judges. On account of their corruption Abu'l Ala would recommend a second thought to those who meditate becoming judges or witnesses. He mentions that no poor-rate is being paid, that no prayer and fasting are being observed, that the law of cleanliness is obsolete, and that, instead of legal marriages, one takes a woman with no dowry, a slave.

Abu'l Ala spoke for his native town upon a further occasion, when he wrote the letter to al Maghribi, the Egyptian minister. We find it somewhat wearisome, not only because it has in English about six thousand words, but owing to the fulsomeness of style. "The townsmen," he remarks, "are silent because they are drowned in your wit," and in the poet's wit are we submerged. "Even though the gardens rustle on the heights and the valley be turbaned with corn-poppies, yet the rough places are not cushioned with tapestry nor the watercourses with rugs." Throughout these lines we do not

have Abu'l Ala saying in one word what he can express in twenty. The greater part of them are occupied with flattery, both as to al Maghribi's person and his rhyme. "The men of bygone days," he writes, "in their epistles would adorn themselves with rhyme as a young horse does with a trot, but none have risen to your eminence." Sometimes we think that he is coming to the point when he begins to talk of al Maghribi's letter, but he turns away to a discussion of the style. From another source we learn that the Egyptian was low-minded, deceitful and envious. "Your letter," says our poet in a mood of Herrick, "is too grand to be kissed; kisses are for its shadow." Flattery and flattery, which was no doubt more effective than argument. At any rate, the conduct of Abu'l Ala compares in wisdom very well with that of his contemporary Abu'l Kasim al Kushairi. This was the great mystic who travelled to Naisapur because the people of his village were troubled with their eyes and with excessive taxes. So the worthy man set out for Naisapur to study medicine and enough arithmetic to qualify him as an assessor. But when he reached the city he fell in with Ibn Dakkak, who discoursed on Sufism with such effect that the traveller gave up his scheme and started as a candidate upon the Sufi's path.

Returning now to the examination of his literary work, we have the *Lozum-ma-la-Yalzam*;

that is, *The Necessity of what is Unnecessary*.¹ It is the greatest thing he wrote, and it is prohibited in Turkey. Some years ago a gentleman from Smyrna, hearing that there was a copy in the British Museum, went there and asked if he could see it. He was told that for the moment he could not, because the book was at the binder's. "Come now," said the traveller, "let me see it." He was told that in a week or two this might be possible, since it would have probably come back. "Oh, why don't you acknowledge," said the gentleman from Smyrna, "that you are frightened of the Sultan?" There is much that is remarkable about the *Lozum-ma-la-Yalzam*: firstly, with regard to the technique wherein Abu'l Ala displays a virtuosity: some of the poems are provided with a double and a triple rhyme, and, as if that were not obstacle enough, he set about to rhyme on every letter of the alphabet. Von Kremer has a most ingenious suggestion that this mode of writing may permit a questioner to ascertain the chronology of the poems. It is thought he took the easier letters in their order, and that after his arrival at the end of the alphabet, he started writing poems on the letters that were difficult and less adapted. Furthermore, in technical accomplishment these poems cannot be surpassed; for men who love

¹ This name is given to the special mode of rhyming which Abu'l Ala adopted.

a literary acrobat this is the sort of thing they will adore. Alliteration, and the play on words, and many other tricks are used. "We have mysterious language," says Nasir, son of Chosrau; "we have parables in very chosen words, so that the reader can but comprehend a small proportion, and suspects that it was meant in opposition to the Koran." Here we see that, if the poet was unorthodox, he could not circulate among the people if he did not cloud them with his clouded language. Some of the *Lozum-ma-la-Yalzam* has a clear and classic beauty, but the parts which now concern us have a mistiness that was intentional. Abu'l Ala would not pretend that all of it is due to the necessity for baffling his opponents; "I am the son," says he, "of my time," and one would not expect him to escape from all of its conventions. With regard to what was forced upon Abu'l Ala by the contemporary narrowness, he did to some extent propitiate it by including phrases such as this: "God is the greatest; there is naught that resembles Him, and it is not permitted that you say of Him, 'He was, or He became.'" So when the scepticism of Abu'l Ala was canvassed by his enemies one could refute them by some orthodox, if inconsistent, passage. "I believe," said el Hekkan, one of his pupils, "that Abu'l Ala is a Moslem." Nobody would claim that all the contradictions in the *Lozum-ma-la-Yalzam* are to be explained

as sops, for the poems were produced at intervals occurring in the space of many years; and, on the other hand, they sometimes were produced without sufficient interval for meditation. But it is extraordinary that Abu'l Ala was not obliged to balance his outspokenness by making larger sacrifices to the mob, though much of him can easily give pleasure to opposing sides. For instance, the idea he has of God is so abstract that you can either think his God is personal or else that it is Nature. Probably some critics thought of him what had been thought of Arius, who ventured, says Plantier, the Bishop of Nîmes, to invoke the miserable chicanery of texts in order to renounce the sanctions of tradition. If Abu'l Ala had not been eminent as a philologist and citizen, his compromises would have probably been unavailing; and his destiny would have resembled that of banished Arius rather than that of Renan, whose impiety, says Plantier, has caused the skies to tremble but has not moved the world to glorious indignation. But the *Lozum-ma-la-Yalzam* is remarkable, besides, for the beauty and the grandeur of its speculations. . . . A commentary was required; Abu'l Ala provided one, and it was lost.

Another work of his to vanish was an imitation of the Koran. "Read what I have written," said Abu'l Ala; "read it from the pulpits for the next four hundred years, and it will gratify

you just as much as does the Koran of Mahomet." He was not by any means the first among the Arabs to embark upon that perilous attempt. In Mahomet's life-time Moseileme had been brought to ruin by the same ambition. Mutanabbi announced that he was a prophet, and also that he was unrivalled. "My words," quoth he :

My words above all other words will soar ;
I say what none has ever said before—

this Mutanabbi thought he could successfully compete against the pattern of Arabian eloquence, the Koran. But for those who followed him there was a prison, while he found it necessary to disown his high pretensions. Of a later epoch was the fruitless effort of Hariri, the repulsive dwarf, the silk-dealer of whom his fellow-countrymen observed that his *Makamat* should be written always upon silk and with letters of gold. His prowess in the language was considerable, but the prowess of Mahomet was far greater, while the substance and prophetic spirit of Hariri were not to be considered very highly. "So incomparable an achievement as the Koran," says Mahomet, "is without the scope of man unless it be dictated him by God. I challenge men and angels to imitate the beauties of a single page!" But woe betide the people who undertook this challenge. One of them was Ibnol Rawandi, a man like dried-up gossamer.

His book was famous for its oaths; "but," says Abu'l Ala, "he did no more than rend his own apparel and expose to view his empty paunch." We know not much about Abu'l Ala's attempt; his literary genius, his thoughts on life and death, were the voices which incited him. He did not want the honorific name of *hafiz* that was given to the doctors who could show themselves proficient in theology. Nor was he like Abu Nizar, the first of grammarians, who took unto himself the title Prince of the Grammarians, and who, if any one addressed him by another name, would fly into a passion. What aroused Abu'l Ala to rivalry was that the Koran had the reputation of an eloquence which nobody could emulate. Al Zamachshari tells us that he was desirous to surpass a certain passage where the Koran, speaking of the fires of hell, says that in truth they scatter sparks as big as palaces and similar to reddish-yellow camels. Speaking of a tavern fire, Abu'l Ala remarks that it is red with rays which travel through the night and scatters many a spark as big as tents. But Fachr al Din al Razi¹ blames al Zamachshari for thinking that Abu'l Ala meant to imitate the Koran; yet he takes this opportunity for saying that the Koran is in many ways much better than the poet. He sets forth a dozen reasons, and "these facts," he says, "have come before us in a single

¹ Cf. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*.

moment; were we to beseech of God that He would help us in the search, then He would offer us as many as we want."

There are only two copies of Abu'l Ala's amusing composition which is called the *Rislatu'l Ghufraan*; that is to say, *Forgiveness*. One copy is preserved at Constantinople, the second belongs to Dr. Reynold Nicholson, the lecturer in Persian at Cambridge. Extending as it does to 219 pages, this work of rhetoric is hardly to be called a letter. We are introduced to Paradise, where conversation flows between the Sheik Ali ben Mansur and the Poets of the Ignorance. They have been pardoned; hence the title of the piece. In his narrative the Sheik does not omit to mention many things with which his friend is quite familiar, but you cannot know, says he, what may befall this correspondence, and it is impossible to think that every one who reads it will have intellectual resources, that his cable, in the words of Abu'l Ala, will be drawn tight. The Sheik's friend has made the pilgrimage no less than five times; being old, he wants to seek a wife, and then to settle with her at Aleppo. Thereupon the Sheik displays an admirable and surprising reticence. It would have been so natural for him to quote a passage of the *Lozumma-la-Yalzam*, which declares that if an old man takes a youthful wife¹ he cannot hope for

¹ Another circumstance which makes the poet deprecate

greater comfort than is meted out to him who rides a camel through the mud ; no longer will the wife put henna on her hand, no longer black her eyelids with collyrium.¹ Instead of such discouragement the Sheik advises him to lose no time in making penance ; for it is a rule that, if a man does not repent of drinking wine before he be translated from this territory of illusions, then he will not be allowed to drink it in the better world ; he compares his correspondent with Abu Uthman al Maziri, who, when he was blamed for drinking wine, retorted : " I will give it up when it becomes the greatest of my sins." The poet whom he first encounters is Zohair. " I was received in Paradise," the singer tells him, " for the reason that my soul abhorred unrighteousness. When I was living men were not restrained, and they were full of lurid mischief." Then, amid the pleasures of the table and the chase, our man discourses with the literary folk, whose failings have been brought

the acquisition of a youthful wife is when you have an old one. This lady, to be sure, is not so beautiful and sweet, but you will find in her far fewer faults :

The sun is fair, and if she rises late,
And if the work of longer days she now may not achieve,
And if the dainty threads she wove
She must herself unweave.

¹ This powder of antimony, we learn from Hajji Baba, is not only used on eyelids but on eyes. Being thought to strengthen them, it is not seldom urged on those whose conduct of affairs is open to reproach,

upon them by the careless critics or the rawi. Many of the poets are unwilling to discuss their works, or even have an argument on grammar. But a greybeard of the Jinn is good enough to make additions to the miscellaneous knowledge of the Sheik. Men have as much acquaintance, so he says, with poetry as cattle have with astronomical phenomena, since they possess but fifteen sorts of metre, while the Jinn have thousands. He probably disdained to mention that a certain Arab poet had been called the Cock of the Jinn, and because his countenance was ugly and his eye was green.

The letters¹ of Abu'l Ala consider most things except time and space. These were not for Heraclitus when he was talking, neither were they for Abu'l Ala when he was writing. "Do not find fault with me for my lengthy chatter, and," says he, "for my interminable haranguing." We do not know who was the correspondent whom he thus addressed. The letter in the English version has ten thousand words. More than one subject is broached. "In accordance with the character of the people of Bassorah," says the sage, "you have written my name wrongly; that is to say, you have written Mahomet instead of Ahmed." He then proceeds to show, with

¹ I have availed myself of Professor Margoliouth's magnificent edition of the letters (*Anecdota Oxoniensia: Semitic Series*, vol. x.), as of the biography with which he introduces them. I will not try to estimate my debt,

many quotations, that these names are not interchangeable, and he discusses, with ample quotations, the whole matter of the confusing of names. "But very easily," he says, "I can pardon you this and am willing to reckon it an ornament, being a straw in a seething ocean"; whereupon he gives all kinds of further quotations to show the errors which his correspondent managed to escape. Pages redolent with anecdote are filled with suppositions as to what this person might have fancied was the name of the philosopher. But all the letter is not critical; Abu'l Ala discusses, with many more quotations, if his correspondent's verses can have been inspired by the Jinn, "for never have I heard of verses ascribed to an angel, otherwise I should suppose an angel to have written yours." And apparently the angels were presumed to have a special knowledge of Arabian prosody, for that it is which claims the expert admiration of Abu'l Ala, and in this point he proves, not sparing the quotations, that his correspondent has outrivalled all the rest. . . . The letters of Abu'l Ala are quite invaluable. Concerned with politics and poetry, they are a torch of light upon the period and the man. Contrasted with his poems they present a very picture of sincerity. The times were such that in his verse Abu'l Ala was forced to compensate for his unorthodox remarks with some whose tendency was orthodox. But if he was not able

in the letters to be perfectly sincere, the compliments that were imposed upon him we can overlook. There is no contradiction of his thoughts on politics and poetry when he assures a correspondent that "Joshua brought back the sun for a part of a day, and you, when you unveil yourself, bring us back the sun." Also we must not regard the letters with suspicion if we find Abu'l Ala carefully preserving them. It was the custom for a man to make a draft of those he sent, for they were looked upon as literary work, and thus an author would not be obliged to ask his correspondents to return them. And it does not matter if they were not sent at all. Some verses of the Minnesinger were ostensibly produced by ladies, and if that was nothing more than a convention the verses and our gratitude need not be less sincere. Accepting, then, the circumstances of the time, we have in the collection of our poet's letters not alone a vast amount of erudition, but a means of learning more of him and his environment. Maybe, as Taine advises, one should be more at pains to print such writing as was not intended to be published; but we need not therefore look suspiciously on other writings.

We can estimate in some degree the writings of Abu'l Ala. And even as a teacher it is possible to gain a knowledge of him that is much more accurate than usually is the case. We have

his thoughts on many subjects, while his disposition also stands revealed. He says himself that he is like a savage animal; we do not need the testimony of his friends and thronging pupils to discern him as he was—a savage when he found himself in front of animals, a sage in front of men. Those to whom he was a teacher would be naturally more inclined to life's amenities; but in his dealing with the lower classes, be they vagabonds or caliphs, he did not permit his natural benevolence to thwart him. To his pupils he was first of all a wonder, with a most prodigious memory; and that they loved him is not strange, for he was quaint and learned, he was tender unto those who were oppressed, he was not tender to himself: "I that am a captive in the world might well desire my freedom; if I yearn for this take no account of me."

Abu'l Ala was faithful as the dead; he was obliged at times to be rebellious against his fellow-rebels. Virtue was to him the guiding star. And his pupils looked upon him as a star; they did not think about his eccentricities, but of his noble character and his acquirements—"learn the use of language, O my sons!" quoth al Mamun's excellent vizier; "it is by this that men are raised above the brutes." We do not see the pupils of Abu'l Ala, like those of his contemporaries Ali ibn Borhan or el Mobarek, detailing tittle-tattle, though, like every man of strong opinions,

he exposed himself to ridicule, if not to criticism. We are told of what he tried to teach, but of el Mobarek that he stood up before his pupils, such was his politeness, and of Ali ibn Borhan that he was a haughty master to the children of the great, a friendly man to foreign students. He was in the habit of embracing handsome boys in the presence of their fathers, and he was excused because he was so erudite and lonely. Yet he made a multitude of enemies for being member of a sect, the Mordshije, which did not believe that unbelievers would be made to stop for all eternity in hell. And a further point of gossip which his superficial pupils have recorded is the fact that he would not consent to wearing trousers, possibly because he thought, like the Bedawi, that this custom is effeminate. The virtues of Abu'l Ala were very striking. He declared himself a foe to slavery and did not share the mildness of the Stoics, who professed to give but slender value to external circumstance. "The sage alone is truly free; such as are not sages," so they said, "are fools." Abu'l Ala denounced the men who do some deed which may be laudable, but only so that recompense may come. And the religious teaching of Abu'l Ala must have our homage, because "thy religion shall be righteousness. And what religion has the man who will not leave a fellow-man with peaceable enjoyment of his right?"

Abu'l Ala maintained belief in God and Fate, one God and one all-swaying Fate. Let those who have preciser knowledge say that he was inconsistent. Now, whatever be the case with men who trust in God, one fancies that the fatalists are not without a tendency to think that Fate will bear substantial portions of the blame and that the remnants are unworthy of consideration. But Abu'l Ala reminds us that we have our understanding, which is always what a man should follow. And above it is our conscience. "If in the mirror of your understanding you perceive what is unlike your conscience, you perceive an evil thing." Maybe such sentiments are not adapted to the weaker brethren, but that is no reason for abuse. It would be hasty, as von Kremer says, and perfectly unjust to charge Abu'l Ala with unbelief and urge that all his wisdom was a mere denial of what other men consider sacred. Revelation, for Abu'l Ala, does not inform the written word; he finds it in the understanding and the conscience. Very well he makes the point that religion is a fruit of earth, and that every people cleaves to such religion as in course of time it has procured. An ordinary man does not believe in his religion owing to the final truth which it possesses; his belief was given him by fathers or instructors. As the Protestants of Nîmes—to take a modern instance—have been given faces that distinguish them,

by reason of more frankness and refinement, from their neighbours—this was told me by the Baron de Bernis, who resides at Nîmes, and is not less a Catholic than was the Cardinal—so were they, so were most of us, provided with religion.

Now we must say some words about Abu'l Ala's philosophy; but, as a prelude, we shall have to fight a little with the persons who consider that a poet's poetry is that by which he should alone be judged. His aim is to produce the beautiful, they say, so that it is beside the mark to judge him, as is often done with Wordsworth, by his message. Here we stand in presence of a man who deals in magic; we turn our eyes away from that and look upon a minor part. However, if we bear it in remembrance that this is indeed a minor part we shall not be condemned. If we are conscious that the story in a picture does not shake the picture's value, then there is no reason why we should not think about the story. Wordsworth's philosophic system and Abu'l Ala's may well be studied, not supposing that they make or mutilate the poetry of these two men, but as a contribution to our understanding of the poet's genius. And, by the way, we cannot disregard the language of an ethic writer as we may neglect the ethics of a poet. "During these latter years," wrote Charlemagne to the bishops and the abbots, "we have oftentimes had sent to us from certain monasteries long epistles which

informed us of the pious prayers which the monks have offered up on our behalf. In the majority of these we find both good intentions and uncultured language." Nor was this remark occasioned by the bias of a literary man; "Seeing that they were too ignorant," says he, "to write becomingly, there was good cause to fear that they would be too ignorant to comprehend the Holy Scriptures." Briefly turning to the message of Abu'l Ala, we may discuss him in relation to Ecclesiastes and to Schopenhauer. "No one," says Schopenhauer, "can appreciate Ecclesiastes before the age of seventy"; but we will only try to catch a glimpse of him. He says that life is bad; it is a circle, and it seems to have no purpose. So, too, says Abu'l Ala, and Schopenhauer says that life is bad. "Free yourself," says he, "of the will to live. Seek redemption by denying your individuality, by being altruistic." Koheleth, like Abu'l Ala, is stirred by social wrong. He is afflicted with world-sadness. He is disenchanted, finding not on earth a paradise to compensate him for the void he sees in heaven. But, disenchanted, he is undismayed. Looking quietly into the dark hereafter which he cannot pierce, he strives to dissipate the darkness of the world. . . . And while the Syrian bore much resemblance to Koheleth, he was gifted with originality; we should, if we had then been living, have addressed

him as deflowerer of the virgin phrases. If we fancy that he does not merit such a title, because at intervals he plagiarised, we must remember how the practice was regarded. "I had meant to ask you to present me with some of your sayings," wrote Abu'l Ala—"lovely sayings, that excel mere riches." Yet on this occasion he refused to borrow. "God forbid," quoth he, "that your benefits should be other than spontaneous."

Reverence and fame were given to Abu'l Ala, but he was disappointed. Predatory poets fell upon him and arrayed themselves in his ideas. "But when I will be dust," says he, "the plant which I have sown will rise." Unhappiness was everywhere, the land grew dark with soldiery, the land grew dark with Islam, the world was growing old. Yet for a man as virile as Abu'l Ala there could be no cessation from the struggle, no faintheartedness in the pursuit of knowledge, no diminishing the zeal with which he studied life and death and destiny, the social, the political and the religious problems. If the world was growing old and he was full of weariness, he mourned his youth. And he died in the year of plague, 1058. A Christian philosopher of Baghdad, Abu Bathlan, writes about this plague, which started its career when he was at Constantinople. After the cemeteries had been filled, four thousand people were interred within the church of

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Luke the Physician. Then the plague spread over Persia. Provinces were pillaged, for the population found black tumours clinging to them, while their spleen distended, and the science of the doctor was of no avail. But if they could not stop the plague, they could at any rate explain the cause of it. The sages in Constantinople said that it was owing to the comet of the year 1054, whereas the men of Egypt pointed to the flooding of the Nile, which had not happened in the year 1053. Ibn Bathlan makes a list of eighteen savants who were victims of the plague; the last of them is Abu'l Ala. On the third day of his illness he requested those who were about him to put down the words of his dictation, but he sank from consciousness. Heroic measures had been favoured by the ancient Arabs to prevent a man from losing consciousness; a man, for instance, who was stung by scorpions: a number of collars and metal bracelets were shaken at the patient's ear throughout the night, sometimes they were shaken by the patient. Those who stood about Abu'l Ala included the *cadi* Abu Mahomet. "May God lighten your grief!" he prayed, "the Sheik is dead." And on the following day Abu'l Ala expired, and his disciple Abu'l Hassan deplored his death: "Though, cherishing religion, you did not cause a tear to flow, yet you compel our eyes to scatter tears of blood. You have sent abroad a reputa-

tion most sublime, which is spreading like the odour of the musk, and laying perfume on the listener and on the mouth of him who speaks your praise." The poet of Ma'arrah had been honoured in his lifetime; he was famous with the crowd, not merely with the men of elevated morals who alone, says Seneca, bestow a worthy recognition. "All the people of Ma'arrah," writes our friend Nasir, the son of Chosrau, "seem to be his subjects. They regard him as their greatest man." From every side came students, and when he was in his grave they recited scores of panegyrics over him. And, not to be content with words, they started showing their sincerity by deeds, much as was done about this time at Nishapur by the disciples of Abdulmalik, the imam of the two harems. So profound a grief was in the breast of these four hundred men that they poured away their ink and broke their pens and interrupted all their studies with a year of mourning. Ibn Khallikan, who meant his vivid and delightful Biographic Dictionary to be nothing more than a compendium of deaths (even as Thucydides intended to produce a simple, inartistic story of events and how they acted on the minds of men)—"I cannot give a separate account of such and such a one," he says, "in consequence of my not being able to discover when he died"—Ibn Khallikan informs us that the poet's tomb is in the courtyard of a house

belonging to his family, which court is entered by a little weather-beaten door. This family, the Tanukh, was much esteemed in Syria, but was itself defective in esteem; when its son, the greatest philosophic poet of the Arabs, had been dead two hundred years, the family paid not the least attention to his grave. . . . Some of you will say that all the wisdom of Abu'l Ala does not make worth repeating what he said about another life. Undoubtedly such meditations travel in a land of utter darkness; yet this life of ours on earth is not so very clear. What Charides replied about the under-world he might have said about our own—great darkness. If we think that with our little lamps we can explore this jungle, would it be a seemly thing for us to laugh at people who explore that other? No, we shall not treat them as Abu'l Ala would have a man to treat his wife, with physical chastisement on the back, when she is anxious to inquire about the future from unauthorized practitioners. Our knowledge of the Day of Judgment being what it is, we may not laugh because the Esthonians are sure that churches will collapse towards the north, which makes them shrink from being buried in that portion of the graveyard. However, it is not a little thing if one is able to console, and sages have attempted often to console the people with a sort of information they demanded, information on the life to come.

And Arabs who were dubious about Mahomet's Paradise, to them were other speculations offered. The Christian Abu Sulma, walking past a tamarisk which had been dried up and now was green: "If the Arabs would not fling me their disdain," he cried, "I would believe that He, from whom you have your life, after you are dry will also make your bones to live when they have gone over to corruption." But before the Moslem was conducted to his everlasting home he was obliged, so said Mahomet, to present himself before the angels, Nakyr and Monkar, who would sit in judgment as the representatives of God. This inquiry is to be conducted on the first night after burial, and for the benefit of the believers it is so arranged that near them in the funeral procession shall be members of the poor to chant the creed, so that the corpse may not be at a loss for words when he is examined by those angels. But among the Arabs some regarded the tribunal with a lack of confidence. And one of them was Abu Imran, who was much revered for having seen a widow of Mahomet. When death was near to him he was sorely troubled. "I declare," he said, "that rather than receive the message of the Lord who will announce my journey either into Paradise or Hell, I would remain as now I am, with my soul contesting in my throat, until the day of resurrection."

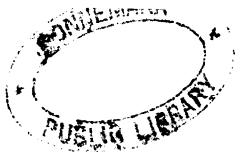
Abu'l Ala did not possess the kind of temperament that dwells upon a life to come. He did not think that immortality belongs to any creature of the land or of the sea. So then he could not hope to bring much consolation. Those to whom Mahomet's Paradise was unconvincing, but who thought they could not live without the prospect of some substitute, such people were not happy with Abu'l Ala. For Abu'l Ala the business of another world was unattractive. El Menasi the vizier came through Ma'arrah and Abu'l Ala complained to him that he was lonely and forsaken. "What have you to do with other men?" quoth el Menasi, "for you have surrendered to them this world and the other." "Also that other?" murmured the poet. He was deeply moved, and spoke no more. But while he could not give a far-spread consolation, his letter of condolence¹ is the finest which he wrote. "Destiny," says he, "is imperious and dominant." And then he paints a dance of death: Adam died—"All men perish, none return!" Noah died—"Who carried Adam when the planks were nailed together, fearing lest his buried limbs should be obliterated by the water." David died—"All men perish, none return!" And Solomon, and he who was supposed to keep the sun from setting, he was made to set. And the Son of Mary, and Mahomet—"All men perish,

¹ No. 30 in the collection.

none return ! ” Then Yasir, son of Amr, son of Yafur ; none had any quarrel with him, he was known as Yasir of the Favours. . . . He went forth into the west, and armies gathered unto him, and he was captain of a host as numerous as are the ants, until he came into the vale of sand, where he despatched a force that perished, no one treading on the road again. Like Shelley’s king of kings, he ordered an inscription to be made, and with Himyari characters : “ There is no path for any one beyond.” And he established this to be a terminus for travellers. Then Yasir fell into the jaws of time. And other chieftains fell, and Hassan, who prevailed against the Jadi by commanding that his men should carry trees ; and Amr, Hassan’s slayer, found the day of death approaching, and, like others, found it came too soon. But the roll-call of Abu’l Ala does not affect us always with solemnity ; he writes about Al Harith that he joined the rest, and was a warning unto men, after he had persecuted and achieved so much. Similarly, modern writers point to Babylon and say that her disaster is a warning to the commonwealth where slavery persists. Babylon’s disaster came when she had had four thousand years of glory. Turning to the other animals, Abu’l Ala does not object to borrow from the observations of his predecessors. Lions have to share the common lot, says he ; “ their eyes are as two burning

torches." And the fair-clad leopard sees that somewhere is awaiting him a keeper of the sheep, or one who does not keep them. And the wolves and the hyænas are familiar with death. "The poor hyæna!" sighs Abu'l Ala, "he might as well have never howled above a carcase, never battered on the remnants of the lion's feast. How merrily he ran across the stones! And now his skin is made into a mantle! Such are time's vicissitudes!" Yet, in spite of all his tenderness for the hyæna, Abu'l Ala prefers that corpses should be given, as among the Indians, to the fire. . . . And the rabbit's mother will not be preserved from death, even though she pray to God. And the wild ass, who bethinks him of a pond, and, going thither at the time of the false dawn, is met by a weapon which says "Die!" and the wild ass dies. And the speckled ostrich, lean and blinking, with a head like a pointless arrow; and the chamois and his mate are not as fleet as death. And every morning do the orphans of an eagle stretch their wings, what time they hear the blowing of the breeze and the croaking of a raven. Afterwards Abu'l Ala descants upon the raven's life, from the days when God has clothed him with the garb of youth and having eyes so clear that they might be the water in the hollow of a rock; then comes the day when he is wounded and compelled to bear a burden similar to that of him who drank too

great a quantity of wine. A hempen cord is tied around his leg, and, being fastened to a chair, he breathes his last. . . . And Abu'l Ala concludes, "If it were not the custom to administer condolence in the time of grief I should have said no word."



PART II

THE POEMS OF ABU'L ALA, AND
SOME OTHERS

. . . and after the jungle comes the open country.
(Abu'l Ala, Letter 39.)

I

On his approaching blindness

Some day, when dust is on this eye,
The years of blindness will not signify.
The graveyard cannot bring me gloom,
Nor yet can one eye's blindness, nor this other's
rheum.

II

Abu Dshafer, the judge, on Abu'l Ala

At Ma'arraḥ dwells a dog
Who thinks religion is a clog,
And in the meanwhile has Ma'arraḥ
Become the surname of a dog.

III

Quatrains by Abu'l Ala

As dawn was flinging on the purple sky
The robe of green, the camel's heavy tread
Sank in the soil, and lo ! the riders said :
What is it that has turned our luck awry ?

May be that people of a faded stem
Have thrown a furtive glance upon the day
That was in splendour being borne away,
Whereof no portion was reserved for them.

When that my youth was like a place of scars
Where flame is dead, then all my joy was spent,
And it could not return and if a tent
Had been erected for me in the stars.

You would have darkness howling on the day
Which took a friend. It was the day before
Which took a comrade to the misty shore
Of sleep and will it drive your sleep away ?

They have been powerless by force and wit
And moving eloquence and lover's guile
This cheek or that one to possess awhile,
And earth has made herself the queen of it.

But I remember, love, how you did swear
That men should never say your neck was bowed
For lovely ornament, you were so proud,
And now the damp of earth is lying there.

82 THE POEMS OF ABU'L ALA,

The soul we have is longing for release,
And in the calm of twilight it will gaze
From out the prison, it will dream of days
Before they lured it from eternal peace.

IV

On his journey to Baghdad

I travelled oftentimes below the pallid moon
That was a thing uprisen from the dampness of
the grave,
And with her stars the night was an Ethiopian
slave
Who throws a girdle of bright shells around her.
But then the moon would sing
That he was but an eagle, clipped of wing,
Who must renounce his lofty quest,
And fearful of the sun
He drove his lightly-burdened camel to the west.

V

Amenities of the road

Here sinks the darkness down, the sleepy wight,
As 'twere the monk upon the holy night,
What time the mourning women searched in vain
And would by no means ask the monk to where
the coffin had been ta'en.

Here do the winds hold back their breath
Or else would every plant be torn to death,
Here surely would my door-post not remain
Unless it were so wooden and inane.

VI

On the death of Ibn Bakijet, at Baghdad

In life and death for you the lofty place,
Undying wonder of the populace !
Around your gallows now the people fight,
As when you gave your wealth for your and their
delight.

Upon the cross your hands are open wide,
As when the prayers of none would be denied.
How shall the narrowness of earth be made
To have such grandeur in her bosom laid ?
So came it that your grave was built on high
Where clouds descend to be your canopy.
Now shall our souls become the shrine
Of all the greatness that was you ;
And as of old the retinue
Of nightly flame was true before
Your most illustrious door,
So shall the flames of many years be true.

VII

On composition and decomposition

You were an apple, friend of mine,
And apples upon you shall dine.

84 THE POEMS OF ABU'L ALA,

Varied the lanterns where the flame is lit,
In varied ways of dance the shadows flit.

VIII

On the gates of birth

Here am I laid, my father's infamy,
But never any child accuses me.

IX

Mustafa ed-Dewlet, on the death of a friend

It is the will of God that he

Whom I have buried in my breast
Should get my tears to feed him, lest

He famish utterly.

For that man who is loved as you, my friend,
Cold earth is not the end.

X

On the prison of life

On that side stand your children, here stand you,

The chasm of estrangement is between,
Which grows the more unbridgeable

As they grow more serene.

For they who were so free and innocent

A father has confined

Within the labyrinths of life

Where sage and fool are blind.

XI

Life and the lover

Said I : Sweet lady, now there is confessed
My love. Said she : You lie, your bones are
dressed.

A lover's skeleton is barely hid,
And, being called, he cannot lift a lid.

XII

Nassaib, on love

The pain of a dove calling
Doth from the darkness leap,
Out of the swaying darkness,
And I am wrapped in sleep.

Oh, if the love I boast of
Did in my heart recline,
Then would his lamentations
Not sing in place of mine.

XIII

Ibn Wekii, on spring

Spring leaves upon the emerald plain
Embroideries of green again.
All earth is glittering in the glare
Of heaven. 'Tis heaven everywhere.
Again the daffodils have spun
Their dances with the wind and sun,

Anemones the rivals are
 Of roses, they bedeck the car
 Of state, the roses hang their head
 And glow more sorrowfully red.
 Whereas the lily doth unite
 Within herself all heaven's light
 And from the sapphire steals the blue,
 She is the sword and banner too.
 The gillyflowers have been dressed
 In their spring garments, striped and pressed.
 Such are the jewels of the year,
 Which even princes would revere
 If they, like princes, did not disappear.

XIV

Hope and time

We laughed and the laughter was foolish,
 It seems to me ;
 Far better that we should be crying
 And bitterly :
 Behold ! we are broken by Time,
 We are failing, we fade—
 But think of the poor, broken glass
 Whereof glasses are made.

XV

Mutanabbi, on his greatness

Is it a marvellous thing that I to myself am a
 marvel,

Since in the world I have seen naught that sur-
passes my soul ?
I who distribute the dews of greatness, lord of
the poem,
A poison fatal to foes, a prong for all envious
men.

XVI

The scholar

If unto men your splendid scholarship
Affords no gain—
O scholar, in the place of dignities
We give disdain.

XVII

Ibn Hasur, on the true scholar

Now let the papers be destroyed, I say,
For surely knowledge will not burn away ;
And if the paper all to ruin is addressed,
All that was written there is guarded in my
breast.

XVIII

The student

The students eagerly go forth to meet
Wise men of cities or the neighbouring street,
And sooner drag their neighbour's honour prone
Than try to lift their own.

XIX

Seradik el Hoseli, on a student of this world

My daughter says, "Abandon wine,
 "You can have other drink," says she.

Then I show virtue in the vine,
 For, as I drink, my limbs are free,
 —The juice of palm was surely made
 So that our limbs could be displayed—

But scented wine has made me dream
 That in the realm of space I flit,
 And while our globe spins round I seem
 To step aside from guiding it.

XX

The next world

I fell asleep at Mecca. When I woke
 Broad understanding on my senses broke :
 Your home is Paradise. O potentate,
 Be there when Time is knocking at the gate.

XXI

Seineddin Ibnol-Werdi's impromptu on the devil

I slept ; the devil came to me
 With his premeditated smile :
 "Can you call down fair sleep awhile,
 From opiates you possess ?" quoth he.

"No," was my answer. "You possess
A wine that burns unhappiness,
And started with its pedigree
When Adam was a boy?" quoth he.

"No," was my answer. "You possess
A girl who is the shepherdess
Of moonlight, who is like a tree
That murmurs to the moon?" quoth he.

"No," was my answer. "You possess
A lyre that in the wilderness
Is wreathed in garlands, whose decree
Can make the stones to dance?" quoth he.

"No." "Then," he cried, "sleep on, alone—
For you are nothing but a stone."¹

XXII

*Seineb, on the death of her brother, who was a good
poet and loved the society of ladies, but was
killed in battle*

The wine is drunk, on bitter grass I feed
Now that misfortune dwells in our Jesíd.
And lo! the warrior swings a splendid sword;
No shield obstructs him. To the furious horde
He throws defiance. Now the fluttering shirt
Wards off the brunt of blows. He would be girt

¹ An impromptu by Seineddin Ibnol-Werdi, while he was
conversing with another poet on the subject of the devil.

90 THE POEMS OF ABU'L ALA,

In costlier harness if a thousand nights
Had not been spent in feasting parasites.
Behold, the champions will regret his fall,
So long as the high waves of battle call.

XXIII

Ayesha, on the death of her father

As in the wind your love-words call
I betake me to your grave—
You that make my tears to fall
Never any answer gave.
But if you desert the ground
Where in our midst we buried you,
Dear love my love, you shall be found
And always where a heart is true.

XXIV

Tathili's longing

The lights of my dear native strand
I shall not see,
And there have come on me—
Ah, joy!—the tears which understand
How they may exile me, through blindness, from
the exile land. . . .
Another light will blossom in this eye
Under the reign of poetry.

XXV

Ibn er-Rebii, on the pleasures of the past

Thou thorn of longing in my breast,
If I could pluck thee, hurl thee hence !
Here in the cloister is no rest,
No sleep. Dear God, oh, pluck me thence—
And, for my sins, here's penitence.
That holy cloister of Kossair
Was like a paradise of joy,
Where you could drink among the fair
Such north-cooled wine as would destroy
Your sorrows, as cool dawn destroys the dark ;
And it is poured—how well the memory stays !
By one whose roguish eye sends out a spark
Into the blood, illumines it or slays.
That bearer of the wine would pass along,
More graceful than a dreaming willow-tree ;
When she was fainting, fainting was my song,
When she was proud, there was a pride in me.

XXVI

As for the past

Traditions have been handed down to me
That would have had importance, would have
had
But for my powers of credulity,
Which are so bad.

XXVII

Freedom

A body with unclosing hand
Falls through the sea.
The dreamy pearls will never dream
Of their captivity.

XXVIII

Freedom on earth

They ventured close to me, but I passed on
With just a side-glance. I that care no whit
For them could feel their fingers holding me—
So bark the dogs what time the moon is lit.

XXIX

*El Morar el Adewy (a man of very noble birth), on
the dream of a palm*

A palm is in the wilderness,
And through the long and lonely day
She has her dream and we have heard them say
That she confides it to the sunken stream—
Oh, can we guess?
We see the branches tremble now,
As hair upon a maiden's brow.

XXX

Abu'l Mosafer, on Fate and palms

And from our native place, O palm,
Thou art a wanderer, just as I.
This delicate Algarvian air
Loves on thy waving branch to lie
Dear stranger, from this lovely land
Thou gazest always to the sky,
Not dreaming of the grievous days,
The children of my memory,
When palms were as green minarets
From which my Fate was wont to cry
And I was wont to bow in tears,
The dark Euphrates rolling by,
And now the river and the palms
Forget my sorrows utterly.

XXXI

Philosophy

Can you not see how well my frame appears,
You being lank and smitten by the years ?
Because you chance to be physicians you rely on
physic stuff.
To be philosopher is not enough !

XXXII

Malik ben Esma (whose life is said to have been irregular) on proverbs

The best of all the proverbs be
Those which are clad in euphony,
And wisdom is a sweeter meat
If no line has too many feet.

XXXIII

Medshnún : variations of his erotic poems

When I met dear Leila her locks were a screen
And the mounds of her bosom could scarcely be
seen.

We drove all the little lambs into their fold—
Ah, if they and we had not come to be old !

And this :

My darling was Leila when she was so young
That scarcely a note in her bosom had sung.
We pastured the flocks, we two children alone—
Ah, that in our bosoms the love had not grown !

XXXIV

Ibnol Hani's lover's compliment

As when the morning laughs, so is she white.
In her remains the fragrance of the night.
And lo ! the pearls which on her bosom lie
Are dull because they fell not from her eye.

XXXV

*Dshemil's compliment to his lost love, when she
reluctantly married another*

By God, whose hand is on my brow,
Of what's beneath her dress I vow
Fine ignorance, and I have not
From her lip more than speeches got.

XXXVI

On a lady travelling with her husband

We overtook the litters, and beside the retinue
A lean man stalked, his shirt in rags, his shoulder
jutting through.

No sun could make him blink, he gazed like death
in front of him,
Surrounded with an armour most invisible and
grim.

I bowed to him, saluted him—his brow was cold,
remote,
And the grimness that was on him seemed to
fasten round his throat.

A mile I strode beside this man. And, by the
grace of God,
So long as life had stayed with him, with him
would I have trod.

96 THE POEMS OF ABU'L ALA,

The lady of the litter knew that all our hopes
were spent,
For the curtain of division hung between us,
with no rent.

She flung a look at me—forsooth, if soldiers such
a knife
Had to resist no soldier but would have to yield
his life.

Her gaze was like the gaze of death, as lightning
from a cloud,
What time the land is underneath uncertain
darkness bowed.

XXXVII

In the high places

The sun is fearful of the glare of day,
And the white, fearing moon is by the darkness
dazed.
Among the stars they go where God commands,
Unfearingly, unpraised.

XXXVIII

Destiny

My locks grew white, and so
I fetched me indigo.

Said she, This hair you dye.
That is the truth, said I.
Thus I lay mourning on,
Because my youth has gone.¹

XXXIX

Looking back

The wine-red river flows,
The golden woodland glows
Up yonder height. . . .
Ah, lovely moment in the life of those
Who bathe in Tigris, they are clothed in light.
A cloud of smoke is turned into a cloud,
Which paints the face of Saturn. We are old —
Day fleets on Tigris in a silver shroud,
The cradle of our day was gold.

¹ "I do not seek to make myself young," said his contemporary, Kisai of Merv, "only I fear lest they seek in me the wisdom of an old man and do not find it." Therefore he dyed his hair. And, assuming that another poem of Abu'l Ala's was founded on experience, we wonder if a lady could resist such pleading:

Said she, beholding that my hair was grey,
"Cease now these prayers and urgings to recite.
The woeful dawn are you. I am the moon,
Which from before your greyness takes the flight."
Said I, "You are no moon, you are the sun,
Who will not shine upon me through the night."

XL

We and the stars

Oh, there be some who think a brooding sky
 Knows all its ailments, even as you and I,
 Who think the stars have got uncommon sense
 And that they talk with learned eloquence.
 But have they various minds, like you or I?
 Are some unfaithful faithful in the sky?
 Perhaps there is a Mecca, and you may,
 As here on earth, behold a Stony Way.

XLI

Abd-Rebbihi, on the wanderer

Round us everywhere the leaves fall,
 You can hear the winds gaily call
 For them to fly—
 And the birds are lured from the nest.
 Wanderer, for you there will be rest,
 To-morrow you will die.

XLII

Muwailik al Mazmum, on his dead love

How came you, love, to step into the house,
 You that are prone to fear,
 The dark house of old Death, at which the brave
 Tremble if they go near?

XLIII

Abu'l Ala's faith

The kingdoms are not swayed by man alone,
For God, in pity, waits behind the throne.
The years have gone like water, and they sweep
New populations to the shore of sleep.
They rose, they gabbled through the morning
prayer
For thinking God would come and find them
there.
But we are as the wilderness of sand
Which has been counted by the Maker's hand.

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